Implications of harmonizing the future of the federal depository library program within e-government principles and policies

John A. Shuler, Paul T. Jaeger, John Carlo Bertot

Collections Development Department, Richard J. Daley Library, University of Illinois at Chicago, 801 South Morgan, Chicago, IL 60607, USA
College of Information Studies, University of Maryland College Park, Room 4105 Hornbake Bldg, South Wing, College Park, MD 20742, USA

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A B S T R A C T

For more than 150 years, the United States Government Printing Office (GPO), along with its Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), has supported an informed citizenry and democracy by ensuring access and preservation to a broad swath of federal government information. This collaborative national public information program between local libraries and the national government, if it is to survive beyond its second century of service, must overcome profound challenges within a rapidly evolving complex of e-government policies and principles. The FDLP can (and must) find a way to serve its traditional values – permanent and public access to government information – that allows for growth and change within the demands of a dynamic electronic environment between the governors and the governed.

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1. Introduction

As defined by the United Nations (2004), e-government is “the use of information and communication technology (ICT), and its application, by government for the provision of information and basic public services to the people” (p. 15). Much of the e-government policy structure implemented over the last 10 years presumes a citizen-centric purpose for these digital services. This shift from institution-driven information services, the dominant production and distribution method for much of government printing over the last 150 years, leaves many of the 19th and early 20th century information programs with an uncertain future. One of the oldest, the Government Printing Office’s Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), is particularly challenged. As GPO grapples with shifts in its technologies – evolving from a traditional printing plant to something else in the world of the internet – FDLP’s participating libraries must deal with their own local pressures that demand rapid shifts in resources (funding, space, staff), service pressures to uplift their technological capabilities to access and disseminate authenticated digital government information, and national pressures to respond to a complicated set of societal expectations from their respective communities about whether or not electronic access to federal information is a priority in access and delivery.

At the national level, these demands mean GPO now must deal with executive and judicial agencies with the technical capacity to reach out directly to citizens without the GPO’s traditional printing and distribution services. At the local level, many of the depository libraries find themselves working increasingly within a variety of privately purchased and institutional information services that supplant the traditional public services created to serve paper and print collections. These external and internal pressures push for a reassessment of the FDLP and the need to effectively plan and manage its future relevance during a period when public information networks are dominated by digital rather than print/paper. To do this, the program must become increasingly integrated within a set of e-government policies and programs that is becoming more citizen-centric, with little understanding of how traditional services of libraries might function within this civic digital framework.

This digital civic purpose found in the E-government Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-347) creates, as its primary goal, enhanced public access to government information via the internet. The FDLP, and the communities it serves, shares a comparable goal drawn from its 19th century roots and can be part of this ongoing technological revolution. Barack Obama’s administration clearly declares its intention to use e-government principles and practices to foster public transparency about the ways that the public authorities make decisions and offer enhanced digital access to government information from a wide variety of official sources on the White House website (www.whitehouse.gov). Obviously, the change in federal executive and legislative leadership following on the historic November 2008 national elections suggests several possibilities for renewal of the library program, especially in the ways in which it can broaden access to digital government information, increase the public use and understanding of the federal government, as well as promote effective ways many of the program’s participating libraries can continue to serve in the program.
A robust FDLP, grounded in the principles of e-government, would harmonize its traditional aspects of public access to take advantage of the expansive technological capacities of digital preservation, storage, bibliographic organization, access, and dissemination of the public's record without altering its core mission to permanent public access. The integration, if done in a deliberative fashion, means the FDLP could harness further resources, both human and institutional, to improve services to all of the program's stakeholders (members of the public, librarians, lawyers, researchers, and students, among many others). Moreover, an opportunity exists to align the FDLP with user-centric information preferences, which dramatically favor accessing information electronically.

To meet the needs of participating libraries and stakeholders, and to serve its important democratic responsibilities, the FDLP will need to reconcile its legislative foundations, professional practices, and rules with the intricacies of the legislative requirements of the E-government Act, as well as other information laws and policies. Along with improved fulfillment of its democratic mission, there exists a range of opportunities to utilize technological capacities, professional advancements, and institutional collaboration to effectively – and economically – preserve, access, and disseminate government information. FDLP's primary goal is to ensure that government information is always available for public access—regardless of past or future technological choices. Seeking government information by members of the public is usually driven by life events that require the information, and indeed sometimes demand the information in the wake of economic or natural disasters (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006a, 2006b). FDLP's structure should evolve over time to meet changing technological capacities and social expectations of stakeholders while maintaining the underlying service principles.

New technological capacities not only allow for the preservation and provision of access to information electronically, but also create the ability for the program's participants to rethink their service models. Digital dissemination can occur automatically across great distances and the range of information can be expanded to include local and state government resources. Collaboration and professional training can occur over the internet, among other enhancements to the traditional FDLP approach to be geographically isolated. A more internet-enabled FDLP could provide a combination of government information access, dissemination, collaboration, and service that would increase usage of FDLP information and promote sustainability.

This article will examine the need for FDLP harmonization within an e-government context. The article discusses the historical evolution of access to government information, followed by an exploration of the foundations and history of the FDLP. After detailing current usage of the FDLP, the article discusses the challenges and opportunities raised by e-government for the FDLP, including the conceptual and legal harmonization of the FDLP and e-government. Finally, the paper discusses key issues that will frame the process of harmonizing the FDLP and the age of e-government.

2. The evolution of access to government information

Throughout periods of human history that saw the creation of great city states and the establishment of agriculture, governments generally directed the focus of their people through public information released and emphasized by authorities, along with the ways in which they released it (Sunstein, 2005). However, any government's level of control and success varied by types of organization and historical epochs. From the middle ages through the 1950s, few questioned the notion of the nation-state or the justifications for nationhood, even during times of revolution when one faction attempted to overthrow an existing nation-state and replace it with a "better" nation-state—it was simply accepted as the way of the world (Toulmin, 1990). This nationalist ideal, however, stands at the center of any understanding of the modern world. A defining element of nation-states is the argument for a centralized authority that directs a society through its complex set of social, political, and economic relationships. Throughout much of modern history, these centralized governments have worked to ensure that they stay in power (Chernilo, 2007).

In the centuries after Gutenberg's 15th century printing press innovations, along with the subsequent spread of literacy fostered by the mass printing industry of the late 19th century, government's control of information remained largely a local issue, with self-appointed or elected leaders dominating a small geographic area who reported to higher levels of central control through specific national policies, edicts, and laws. This command and control structure attempted to curtail early printing technology's economic and political influence, and its intellectual byproducts, through limitation of access and censorship. The rise of the printing press and mass-produced books, however, radically changed how central governments could control society's information flows. Moveable type and the subsequent mass-produced books not only spread literacy, but became a critical element in the concept of the nation-state. Books were printed in the most commonly used languages rather than the hundreds of dialects and minorities languages at use in Europe; as a result, it encouraged the formation of cultures and nations around major languages. As such, printing simultaneously fostered communication and barriers to communication.

Further, while printed documents encouraged the spread of unpopular or dangerous ideas (at least to the ruling civil and spiritual authorities), they also encouraged more structure, consistency, and centralized control by shaping a common point of view to be expressed by the government, encouraging a common language shared among the people for law and governance, and built a greater national orientation by citizens and away from feudal/local connections (Hanson, 2008). "This shared sense of group identity gradually evolved into the ideology of nationalism" (Hanson, 2008, p. 16). Printed materials encouraged a coordinated sense of language and culture among a population previously divided by geography, language, and traditions. This clearly gave governments an incentive to try to control information. In fact, some argue that the invention of the printing press led directly to the invention of effective government censorship and secrecy (Pool, 1990). It also led to government institutionalization of information control both in terms of their subjects and in an effort to limit the impact of other national governments on their internal affairs.

This control extended to the information's collection and storage, the supervision of activities of people in their speech and writing, and the application of information gathering techniques designed to assure compliance with government rule by those under official surveillance (Dandeker, 1990; Giddens, 1985; Howard, 1983). The innovations of late 18th century radical philosophies that demanded a more democratic form of governance, worked against these less liberal efforts to centralize the control of information. "Political theory has given a twofold answer to the question of [state] legitimacy: popular sovereignty and human rights ... ground an inherently legitimate rule of law" (Habermas, 2001, pp. 115–116). For democratic revolutionary movements in Europe and North America, "the co-originality of liberty rights and the rights of citizens is essential" was necessary to overthrow the dominance of royal families. (Habermas, 2001, p. 117).

The American Declaration of Independence drew directly from this burgeoning philosophy of personal freedoms and individual rights. In particular, it notes the separation of public records and legislative bodies as one of the reasons for a revolution—with one of the foundational notions to emphasize "the idea of public information" as a central tenet in the new governmental structure (Quinn, 2003, p. 283). As with many other issues supported by the freedoms of open debate and free exchange of competing viewpoints, America's constitutional founders argued for a citizen's right to free speech,
press, religion, and assembly and the necessity to petition a government for the redress of personal and organizational grievances. Many of the founders – James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and George Mason – placed great value in a new form of government that sustained open official publishing, deliberative information dissemination by government agents, along with the coordinated distribution of many government publications to newspapers and public institutions at the regional and local level (McDermott, 2008).

During the first half century of constitutional rule in America, James Madison, the most significant of the several "authors" who fashioned the constitution's final text, wrote, “A popular Government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.” A key part of the growth of the American republican ideals through the first decades of a federal government was to provide access to government information—either through free speech, assembly, or press; or by deliberative actions of the government itself.

 Freedoms and civil rights found in the Constitution and its first ten amendments, so radical at the time, are now part of democracies and republics around the world. These have created protections (and expectations) that demand the public's access to and exchange of government information, to such a point where the right to access government information is now part and parcel to free expression (Berlin, 1996). “Without accurate information about the reasons for and effects of proposed government policies, citizens can’t reasonably assess the actions that officials are taking on their behalf” (Fritz, Keeler, & Nyhe, 2004, p. 10). As such, the underlying concept of these democratic rights to public information requires broad and equitable access to accurate socially and politically meaningful information provided by the government (Jaeger, 2005, 2007; Jaeger & Burnett, 2005).

3. Access to government information in the United States

Building on these basic documents created by the constitutional founders, the first law that ensured at least some dissemination of printed legislative and executive information was enacted in 1813—offering printed materials to a small number of state offices, universities, and historical societies. In the early days of the republic, public printing was handled by private contractors. Corruption, political bribery, and general dissatisfaction with their work led to the creation of the GPO in 1860, and, at its peak, there were more than 200 government printing facilities (Morehead, 1998). The depository library program was merged with GPO in 1896 (Shuler, 2003). Since 1962, the program has followed the distribution and retention requirements detailed in the Depository Library Act of 1962 (P.L. 85-579). However, in the five subsequent decades, enormous technological, social, and legal changes have radically altered the environment around the FDLP. Since the mid-1960s, this decentralized network of local and state institutions grew to include more than 1200 libraries. Nearly all are “selective depositories,” accepting a portion of the documents, while fewer than fifty agree to serve as regional libraries that collect all material distributed by GPO.

In direct response to the technological revolutions in the 1970s and 1980s, changes in the depository law took place in 1993 – the Government Printing Office Electronic Information Access Enhancement Act of 1993 (P.L. 103-40) – and were a clear sign from both the program's participants and others that FDLP needed to adapt to an increasingly digital public exchange of government information. Additional alterations in the U.S. federal policy environment during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton administrations encouraged agencies to rely less on FDLP to make information available (Adler, 1996; Shuler, 2002, 2005). In 1995, agencies began publishing government documents exclusively on their own websites, while in 1996 documents were made available through printing office's primary web resource: GPO Access (Aldrich, 1996; Ryan, 1997).

The rapid rise of the internet as a primary means of accessing and disseminating information quickly began to undermine the value of paper and print deposits to FDLP member libraries and their collections. In 1996, 21 million print documents were sent to member libraries (Farrell, Davis, Dossett, & Baldwin, 1996). However, user preference for electronic versions of government documents soon became very clear—it has been suggested that the watershed moment occurred with the electronic release of the Starr Report online in 1999 (Heisser, 1999). Shortly thereafter, the first day the 2000 budget was available, it sold fewer than 4500 print copies (a 40% drop from 1998 print sales) but was accessed more than 115,000 times online (Fishier, 2003). From 1992 to 2000, the number of print documents available to FDLP libraries dropped from 70,468 to 26,994, though more than three-quarters of libraries were accepting fewer than 40% of the titles in 2000 (Shuler, 2001).

By 2003, GPO Access made available 24,251 electronic titles, but only 14,045 print titles were shipped to FDLP libraries (Arrigo, 2004). Of the titles that were being sent to FDLP libraries at that time, two-thirds were soon after made available online through other government agencies (Lopersti & Gorin, 2002). By 2005, 90% of the titles being sent to FDLP libraries were available electronically (Shuler, 2005). Regardless of the activities of FDLP libraries, “gone are the days of the GPO being the sole, or even primary, supplier of government information to libraries or to the public” (Selby, 2008, p. 40).

Over 90% of government information is now “born” digital, and nearly all users expect electronic access to be the primary means of distribution and organization (Kubicek, 2008; Priebe, Welch, & MacGilvray, 2008). Although GPO and its depository libraries are now largely creatures of the public digital environment, primary means of locating and accessing information remain largely in private hands. A 2008 study of FDLP patrons found 77.4% regularly used Google, or another commercial search engine, to find government information, while only 9.3% used GPO Access, and only 5.5% used the print collection (Burroughs, 2009). Of the people who use the FDLP print collections, most access information online first and then use the print collection for supplemental research (Burroughs, 2009). However, most users surveyed found significant problems in relying on commercial search engines to find government information. Not only do these search engines not tap into (or catalog) many government websites’ deeper layers, the search algorithms of the most popular search engines have a considerable impact on the types and amounts of political information users readily access, ultimately impacting the types of government information they can reach (Rogers, 2004). The individual’s ability to determine the quality (and accuracy) of such searches is likely to have a disproportionate impact on people who are less advantaged in terms of education, information access, and income (Schlozman, Page, Verba, & Fiorina, 2005).

E-government law and policies expect new variations of government information byproducts not easily handled within FDLP’s current construction of how it handles material produced by GPO (Bertot, Jaeger, Shuler, Simmons, & Grimes, 2009). Much of the information disseminated through e-government programs is not, nor will it ever be, in the traditional form of print and paper documents. Rather, it is primarily made available through agency services and social media (Chang & Kannan, 2008; Osimo, 2008; Synder, 2009). Federal agencies now use blogs, wikis, social networking sites, cloud applications, and virtual worlds, among other social media, to create public records, disseminate program information, and communicate directly with the public and other agencies (Barr, 2008; Kauffman, 2007; Sternstein, 2006; Synder, 2009; Wyld, 2008). None of this assumes a need for the traditional role of the depository library to further these agency and programmatic goals of informing the public. The Obama administration has set a priority to employ Web 2.0
technologies to either accomplish or deliver on its political promises, and the newly appointed Federal Chief Information Officer strongly encourages the expansion of the public information realm along these lines (Lipowicz, 2009, Thibodeau, 2009). The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) (2006) considers emails, instant messages, text files, image, audio, and video files – as well as internally hosted blogs, wikis, and syndication tools – as government records. FDLP’s current structure of production and distribution has no clear way in which to deal with these new forms of government information creation, distribution, and preservation that now exist only in an electronic environment.

In reaction to these developments, FDLP libraries began to rethink their activities and roles, with responses from the program’s participants ranging from the development of public electronic gateways to a wide variety of government information sources, to the establishment of strategies and collaboration among libraries in a particular region to assure rapid information delivery (Lawrence, 1996; O’Mahony, 1996). Other advocates for the program’s future in a digital world emphasize the program’s new purpose as one based on public access and service rather than local collection and retention, while other libraries are now considering leaving the program if resources become increasingly available only in electronic format (Aldrich, 1996; Heisser, 1999; Shuler, 2008; Kram, 1997; Wilkinson, 1996). Some argue vehemently for no changes in the program regardless of the rapidly changing social, legal, and technological environment (Jacobs, Jacobs, & Yeo, 2005; Peterson, Cowell, & Jacobs, 2001).

Statements about the FDLP’s future, as delivered by the GPO and its Depository Library Council (DLC), attempt to articulate these various approaches and account for serious changes in the current situation. In 2004, the GPO issued a strategic vision that clearly recognized the need to shift to a system of digital content management and dissemination (GPO, 2004). In 2006, the DLC offered its own argument for a future FDLP that included the following components:

• multiple access points (digital and paper/print);
• access in appropriate formats (if paper is better for preservation and access, it should be retained as the format of choice);
• assuring the public’s free and permanent public access to digital sources;
• more effective training for librarians on how to use and organize digital information;
• the creation of appropriate meta-tagging and other descriptive tools;
• enhancing collaborations among depository libraries and with the GPO; and
• expanding awareness of the FDLP program and its service to the nation (DLC, 2006).

The report concluded with the recognition of the imperative that depository libraries realign to meet the needs and habits of their 21st century clientele—a clientele whose information-seeking behavior increasingly bypasses libraries and their services as well as the collections they provide via the depository program” (DLC, 2006, p. 11).

4. Harmonizing e-government and government information

Since the enactment of the first freedom of information laws in the mid-1960s, deliberative public policy assumes a series of collaborative information activities organized (and directed by) the federal government. To be effective, these policies ought to possess coherence (the pieces are part of an organized, interconnected, whole); hierarchy (it has an organized system of management and enjoys the power of authority); and instrumentality (it pursues a particular and clearly articulated purpose) (Colebatch, 1998). However, over the last 15 years, both technology and the policy process has become so interwoven in complexity, that it far outpaces the ability of any legislative and executive process to make coherent, and forward-looking, sense about issues related to the growing reliance on e-government programs and services (Braman, 2006; Grimes, Jaeger, & Fleischmann, 2008; Jaeger, Lin, & Grimes, 2008). The FDLP is not unique in its struggles to come to terms in an environment where practice is falling behind the institution’s technological capacities and expectations. However, as many government agencies and programs struggle to reconcile approaches to government information in the print and electronic worlds, some choices will have to made (Bertot et al., 2009).

Rather than the historic focus on specific, or wholesale, modifications to the Depository Library Act of 1962, and its implementing statute (as in done in GPO, 2008), the FDLP would benefit from seeking to harmonize its activities and structures within the e-government realities that will largely shape its future. The federal government continues to shift ineluctably toward a policy structure and system of programs that expect digital information, records, and services to achieve many of its legal and legislative obligations. As demonstrated by choice and participation in the last national election, a growing majority of users now expect to access and use government information electronically (Jaeger, Paquette, & Simmons, in press). The widespread diffusion of public technology, and connectivity, means a majority of users can access digital government resources from anywhere, anytime, and through a greater variety of technology platforms—from desk tops, to lap tops, to netbooks, and all manner of mobile devices.

Government information librarians, after nearly 15 years changing in this digital world, are much more proficient in reaching out to patrons and helping them find, use, and understand government information online. In today’s environment, the FDLP’s legal, social, technical, service, and professional contexts are radically different from those of 1962. In order to remain relevant, the FDLP must determine roles it can play that fall more broadly under the e-government umbrella.

Government publications (as traditionally gathered and distributed through the FDLP) and information sources are a critical part of e-government, yet they are not the only element of e-government. According to earlier bibliographic traditions, government publications were primarily physical paper and print objects that contained government information. In the rapidly changing environment of e-government, these containers are no longer important, but their content remains supreme. Today’s digital environment allows government agencies to not only deliver information to individuals, but also integrate levels of service that allow for direct contact with specific individuals or bureaus in an agency, financial transactions, and social networking (Bertot et al., 2009). E-government information can differ significantly from the way the same information would be presented through paper and print formats. For instance, integrative e-government information reaches a broader audience than traditional and stand-alone government documents collections. This creates many opportunities for digital government providers to repackage and market their information and their positions in ways that were not previously possible (Bertot & Jaeger, 2006; Jaeger, 2007).

While e-government is widely used to disseminate information directly by agencies to citizens, there are concerns related to reliance on electronic distribution by agencies to ensure access to government information. The vast majority of users prefers to access and use government information electronically. The diffusion of technology and connectivity means that users can access online government resources at home, at work, or at the public library. Librarians of all types now are typically proficient in helping patrons find and use government information online. The legal, social, technical, and professional frameworks surrounding the FDLP have changed fundamentally since the
enabling legislation was written, forcing the FDLP to envision the productive roles it can play in this changed environment.

E-government, as the provision of government information and services through the online environment, includes such diverse interactions as applying for Medicare prescription drug plans to paying taxes to emailing a public official. Seeking government information is the primary reason that people use e-government in the United States; for example, 77.3% of internet users have used e-government to get information related to recreation and travel (Reddick, 2005).

For more than a decade, users have looked to e-government as a valuable source of information, considering e-government sites to be "objective authoritative sources" of information (Anderson, 2002, p. 1). In the United States, 58% of internet users believe e-government to be the best source for government information and 65% of Americans expect that information they are seeking will be on a government site, with more than 26 million Americans seeking government information online every day (Horrigan, 2006; Horrigan & Rainie, 2002).

While many citizens actively use e-government from home and work, nearly half of the residents of the United States still do not have access to broadband services on which e-government services rely (Horrigan, 2008). As a result, many people with no other access, with insufficient access, and who need assistance using e-government, go to public libraries to access e-government (Bertot et al., 2006a, 2006b). Among patrons using e-government in libraries, 52.4% do not own a computer, 42.4% lack access both at home and at work, 40% are there because access is free, and 38.1% rely on the assistance of librarians (Gibson, Bertot, & McClure, 2009). "When people struggle with, become frustrated by, or reject e-government services, they turn to public libraries" (Jaeger & Fleischmann, 2007, p. 42). When using e-government in libraries, 28% of patrons report needing help with e-government generally, 24% struggle with time limits, 16% have difficulty using websites, and 13% have difficulty with forms (Gibson, Bertot, & McClure, 2009).

Internet penetration in public libraries has now reached nearly 100%, and perhaps more significantly, the only free public internet access in almost 75% of communities in the United States is provided by public libraries (Bertot, McClure, & Jaeger, 2008). Because public libraries are serving as the social guarantor of internet access, they have also become the social guarantor of e-government access and training, in circumstances ranging from commenting on proposed regulations to seeking aid after a natural disaster (Jaeger, Langa, McClure, & Bertot, 2006; McClure, Jaeger, & Bertot, 2007). Though e-government access places considerable new obligations on libraries – ranging from emergency response to providing assistance in using government services across the thousands of government websites – the fact that public libraries are serving in these roles ensures that people can always reach a public access point for e-government (Jaeger, 2008; Jaeger & Bertot, 2009).

While this role of public libraries reduces fears among some in the FDLP community that electronic publishing by government agencies will adversely affect users without sufficient home access, there are other significant concerns related to reliance on electronic publishing to ensure access to government information. These concerns revolve around the proper retention and preservation of electronic-born government information byproducts—preserving a continuum of access, establishing authenticity and integrity, determining the distribution of electronic sources in relation to the FDLP, and facilitating trust in the documents (Barnum, 2002). Thus far, policies about information within the context of e-government remain primarily concerned with the facilitation of increasing the amount of information delivered and received, as well as the expansion of these services to replace paper and print-based services. Yet, the scope of e-government is enormous—federal e-government now encompasses more than 30,000 websites and well over 100 million pages (Evans, 2007). This fluidity in format and purpose raises many questions about how to handle digital-born government information, leaving many government agencies unclear about how and what to save and resulting in the loss of large quantities of electronic government information—from email records to reports posted on government websites (Pear, 2008).

Given these concerns, the age of e-government still leaves considerable roles for the FDLP to play. The FDLP legislative mandate may now best be viewed in the broader context of a range of legislation, regulation, and policy documents. Clearly, the FDLP must work to harmonize its mission with these important legal, technological, professional, and social changes that have occurred since the Depository Library Act of 1962 was passed. Table 1 includes key technology-related legislation from the last 15 years and issues they raise for FDLP structure and practices.

| Table 1 | The legal context of the FDLP. |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Law | Key impacts | Issues for FDLP |
| Information Technology Management Reform Act | Standardized information management across federal agencies | Encouraged agencies to move toward producing more information electronically |
| Government Performance and Results Act | Standardized government records management | Encouraged agencies to move toward creating and managing more records electronically |
| Electronic Freedom of Information Act | Created obligations to disclose electronic information | Increased need for agencies to preserve electronic information |
| Government Paperwork Elimination Act | Reduced paper records and accepted electronic signatures | Encouraged agencies to reduce the number of physical documents created |
| USA Patriot Act | Created new powers of control over the release of government information and retraction of formerly released information | Gave law enforcement agencies greater ability to dictate status of availability of electronic information |
| E-government Act | Ordered government agencies online and increased information and services available online | Directly agency release of their own information online and prioritizes electronic access to government information |

A thread running through all of these laws – and many other related laws and policies – is the belief that government should continue to mostly, if not entirely, create electronic information and the necessary structures for access, use, and dissemination. These laws also strongly encourage agencies to move away from the creation of the physical records that are still seen as the FDLP's traditional paper and print quintessence. Though some see this e-government ethos as a direct threat to the FDLP, it does offer major new opportunities. The integration of e-government principles can allow the FDLP to harness its traditional capacities to improve mediation and public services to all its stakeholders (members of the public, librarians, lawyers, researchers, and students, among others) that seek to find, use, and understand complicated government information sources. To meet
the demands in this new environment, there is a need for the FDLP to reconcile the information principles that underlie the Depository Library Act, the E-government Act, and other information laws and policies.

5. The future of the FDLP and e-government

The availability of most government information online, combined with the power of private search engines such as Google, ultimately allows every library to serve as an effective access point for government information. This dramatically increases the possible number of libraries that can fulfill FDLP’s overall mission, as well as more people who can access government information from home or work (Farrell, 2005; Seavey, 2005; Selby, 2008), and the expansive capabilities of technology that allows access from across a range of devices. From this perspective, government librarians and the FDLP collections need to function more as civic guides to finding and thinking critically about government information, as well as to think about access and dissemination approaches that extend beyond print and computers (Arrigo, 2004; Hogenboom & Woods, 2008; Shuler, 1996). “We still have to explain intrinsic connections shared among government process, organization, and their associated information objects” (Shuler, 2004, p. 247).

In the electronic environment, new approaches to framing the collection of government documents seem to be appearing, with the active or passive materials selection by libraries and control of such selection resting with the library, with a liaison, or with the creators (Lin & Eschenfelder, 2008). Some libraries have become engaged in preserving government information by capturing the materials directly from government websites, like the National Digital Information Infrastructure and Preservation Program (Murray & Hsieh, 2008). However, many FDLP libraries still focus on government information as an act of collection building rather than as a primary public service (Shuler, 2005). Programs such as these may offer approaches that could inform the development of an e-government FDLP.

Key issues going forward in the process of harmonizing the FDLP with the age of e-government will include:

• Legal context of the FDLP. The process of harmonizing the laws underlying the FDLP with the laws underlying e-government will require considerable thought and reconsideration of policies. Given the lag between technological innovation and policy change, policy related to harmonization of the FDLP and e-government must be based on conceptualizations of government information that look past current forms and technologies to ensure that parallel problems do not occur with future technologies. Otherwise, revisions of legislation will leave FDLP libraries grappling with an outdated electronic format as they now struggle with print materials.

• Sustainability of a digital-age FDLP. FDLP’s future depends on how well the GPO and the participating libraries can fashion clear policy, collaborative arrangements, and practice that allow for harmonization with the mandate of e-government and effective collaboration on public service rather than physical collections. Both the 1962 and 1993 laws have changed the program’s underlying roles assigned to the libraries and the GPO, framing the professional perspective of practicing librarians for almost a half century. The current operational context, however, is significantly different and needs to acknowledge and incorporate shifts in service, operation, and technology, as well as address transitional issues such as the digitization of print materials to accompany to move to electronic collections.

• Internet-enabled service context. Social networking, mobile devices, increasingly digitized information content, collaborative ventures for the provision of information services and resources (i.e., digital reference and cooperative organizations), and digital government services and resources all serve to create a service context that simply did not exist prior to the integration of the internet into the fabric of library and government services and resources. The growing use of social media in e-government and other forms of non-traditional government information must be considered in the future FDLP.

• Collaboration through digital technology and workspaces. Unlike a print-based collection that is bound in time, space, and service context, the tools of an e-government environment offer the potential to create entirely new service models that can substantially enhance the access to and dissemination of government information. A collaborative approach between GPO and participating libraries, as well as among participating libraries, would enable participants to develop economies of scale, depth, and service expertise and focus while simultaneously through collaboration providing users with a deeper and more thorough expert access to government information. In addition, collaboration can provide more, not less, access to increasingly digital content.

• Data collection strategies. One of the issues that the government information community faces is the lack of reliable usage information regarding government information collections, user preferences, and a range of other factors surrounding the multiple dimensions of government information access and dissemination. There is a need to embed within the structure of the FDLP valid, reliable, and standard data collection approaches that inform the use, benefit, impact, and operation of the program and its information content. These data will help in the improvement of service and in the formulation of better policy.

These represent some of the more pressing issues in harmonizing the FDLP and e-government, though other major issues will likely become evident as the issues above are addressed.

With over a century of public information service, FDLP is one significant strand in a vast interrelated network of information creation, organization, and distribution that supports a healthy democracy. Just as the government needs a permanent record of its government information in a paper and print world, so too must it clearly adapt this vital resource to the age of e-government. Under its present structure, the FDLP cannot hope to capture, organize, and make accessible all of the present and future new formats of government information that are possible through the expansiveness of e-government. If the program’s future is held to this impossible goal, then the FDLP does not serve its function as a permanent and free record of government activity or intent. Librarians, government agency officials, educators, and policy makers clearly share mutual, as well as individual, interests in any attempt that ensures a national program of government information service to the needs of local and regional communities around the country. And the program must sustain the civic conversation so necessary to the future health of our democracy.

All these groups must focus on – and work together – to ensure that a FDLP’s future purpose supports its traditions of open access and permanence to government information, as well as citizen participation in a collaborative, e-government-enabled service environment.

References


**John A. Shuler** is Associate Professor and the Bibliographer for Urban Planning/ Government Information in the University Library at the University of Illinois, Chicago. His research focuses on government information librarianship, information policy, and the literature of urban planning. Prof. Shuler is the author of more than twenty journal articles and book chapters, as well as being a coauthor/contributor of five books. He is the Assistant Editor of *Government Information Quarterly*. His research has been funded by the Department of State, Department of Energy the Institute of Museum & Library Services, the American Library Association, and the University of Illinois. He is the 2009/2010 Chair of the U.S. Public Printer’s Federal Depository Library Program Council.

**Paul T. Jaeger, Ph.D., J.D.** is Assistant Professor and Director of Center for Information Policy and Electronic Government in the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland. His research focuses on the ways in which law and policy shape information behavior. Dr. Jaeger is the author of more than eighty journal articles and book chapters, along with six books. He is the Associate Editor of *Library Quarterly*. His research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the Institute of Museum & Library Services, the American Library Association, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

**John Carlo Bertot** is Professor and Director of the Center for Library & Information Innovation at the University of Maryland College Park ([http://licenter.org](http://licenter.org)). His research spans e-government, information and telecommunications policy, and library technology planning and evaluation. He serves as editor of *Government Information Quarterly* and *Library Quarterly* and is on the board of the Digital Government Society of North America. Over the years, his research has been funded by the Institute of Museum & Library Services, the American Library Association, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the National Science Foundation, and a number of federal and state agencies. More information regarding Bertot is available at [http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~jbertot/](http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~jbertot/).